

Mary Soyenova

Small-town sign making in the Smokies

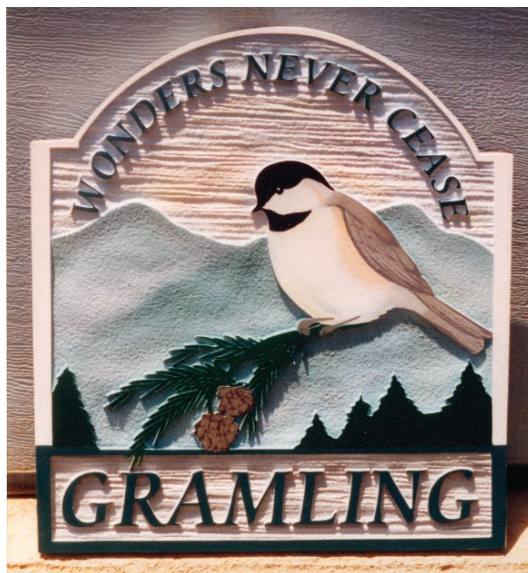
Where: Black Mountain, North Carolina **Age:** 59 **Shop name:** Black Mountain Sign Studio **Shop size:** 900 sq. ft. **Staff:** Mary and Ed, her husband **Graphics equipment:** FlexiSign on a PC **Market area:** The many small towns of western North Carolina's Smokey Mountains

I have been a sign painter for most of my adult life. As a single mother during the height of the women's movement, I became one of Cleveland, Ohio's, first female electric meter readers (I called myself a "watt-usage analyst"). Even though I loved the outdoors, winter in Ohio can be brutal—and I knew that this job wasn't my life's work!

At 30 I decided I wanted to be a "commercial artist" because it sounded nifty, so

I went back to school and began taking graphic arts courses. Eventually I began visiting the sign shop across the street from the college and started seeing a different side of commercial art. Soon I was going there nearly every day between classes and learned the basics of sign painting. That was my introduction to the craft, and all along the way I've had mentors.

Fifteen years later when Ed, whom I later married, had a heart attack and triple bypass, we sold every earthly possession (except for my sign kit!), bought and converted a Greyhound bus into a motor home/sign shop and set out on our adventure. We spent four years



Sandblasted 16-by-18-in. Sign•Foam [Sign Arts Products, 800-338-4030, www.signfoam.com] high-density urethane panel finished with acrylic latex paint and Cabot stain [800-877-8246, www.cabotpaints.com]



Vinyl film on 18-by-42-in. aluminum panel finished with two-part urethane [Akzo Nobel Coatings, 770-662-8464, www.signfinishes.com]. The header was sandblasted in redwood then cast in resin by Goldenwest Manufacturing [530-272-1133].

on the road painting signs and meeting other sign makers. A highlight of the trip was meeting John Hannukaine at a Letterheads meet in Washington where he was teaching pinstriping. We crisscrossed America, saw Alaska and had some great adventures.

We knew it was time to stop traveling when I started yearning for a compost pile and a garden—there are some things you just can't do in a bus! When we found Black Mountain, North Carolina, we knew we'd found the place to stop. We opened the Black Mountain Sign



Hand lettered and airbrushed on 4-by-6-ft. overlaid plywood panel finished with Chromatic® enamel [1Shot, 219-949-1684, www.1shot.com]. The framed glass block is attached to 4-by-4-in. posts.

The Toughest Glue On Planet Earth.

Gorilla Brand Premium Glue is the all purpose, interior/exterior glue ideal for most repair and bonding needs. It's great for indoor/outdoor projects, as well as general repairs. Bonds wood, stone, metal, polyurethane foam, ceramic, plastics and more! Incredibly strong and 100% waterproof.



for retailers near you:
www.gorillaglu.com
 1-800-966-3458



Circle No. 236 or visit www.signcraft.com

Tired of Flat Cut Outs? Why Not Try...



Photo courtesy of Bob Stanton, Mr. Sign, Milford, CT

PROUDLY MADE IN THE USA

SUPER STOCK H.D.U. SIGN BLANKS

- Our smooth preprimed surface is ready-to-finish
- Quick turnaround
- Many weatherproof shapes & sizes
 - Great for historical districts & other strict sign codes
- FREE catalog & discount sample offer

1-800-551-7440

Circle No. 159 or visit www.signcraft.com

Mary on sign painting “on the road”: We knew it was time to stop traveling when I started yearning for a compost pile and a garden. **On discovering the sign business:** I was studying graphic arts, but began visiting the sign shop across the street from the college and saw a different side of commercial art. **On small-town shops:** It’s wonderful to wave to folks on the street downtown.



Digital 3M Comply™ graphics, output by Ad Graphics [954-974-9900, www.adgraph.com] on 10-by-12-ft. AlumaCorr™ [Nudo Products, Inc., 800-826-4132, www.nudo.com] panel. Design by T.J. Miller, Graphic Jam, Atlanta, Georgia.



Hand lettered on 3-by-4-in. overlaid plywood panel. The apple is carved Sign•Foam high-density urethane board. The pencils are PVC posts, primed and painted with lettering enamel and finished with gold vinyl finials.



Sandblasted 12-by-18-in. Sign•Foam high-density urethane panel



Sandblasted 4-by-7-ft. Sign•Foam high-density urethane panel



Hand lettered on 2-by-8-ft. AlumaCorr™ panel. The radish is carved Sign•Foam high-density urethane board on a 3-by-3-ft. sandblasted panel.



"Cracked ice" holographic film [Graphic Films, Inc., 800-634-7523, www.fdcfilms.com] panels on 3-by-8-ft. AlumaCorr™ panel with plastic trim. The graphic is hand painted and airbrushed on Fiber Brite™ [US Highway Products, 800-883-8363, www.fiberbrite.com] board, clear coated with Frog Juice [Far from Normal Supply, 800-877-1907].



All vinyl graphics with etched glass film [Graphic Films, Inc.] background to add depth



Hand lettered and airbrushed on 2-by-8-ft. panel of 1/2-in. overlaid plywood

Studio in 1992, and have been here ever since. Black Mountain is a tiny, tourist town (population 8000) whose sign painter had recently passed away. Though we're not wealthy, we have a very rich life here—I'm involved in many civic organizations, helped to write the sign ordinance and find it so wonderful that I can smile and wave to folks on the street downtown.

Sign painting is my life—but it's not my whole life. It's important not to get obsessed

with the work and let the other parts wither away. I've read quite a bit about sign painters who get so involved in their work that their world ends up crashing. I don't really have any advice except to stay interested in everything that life has to offer, and to close the door at the end of the day and walk away. Like housework, it will be there tomorrow! •SC

—From an interview with John McIltrout